A LOOK AT CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

by William S. Adams

I Introduction

Ours is a remarkable and unprecedented time in the worship life of the Church. From the 16th century to the mid-20th, most of our worship forms and assumptions have tended to divide the various churches, to give the denominations particular and separate identities. Now, all that is changing. Instead, our time of renewal is happily characterised by a remarkable consensus. One need only look at the revised liturgical forms used by English-speaking churches in North America (be they Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, Anglican, Roman Catholic or United) to realise how very much we hold and do in common — patterns and formats, calendars and readings, prayer forms and hymns. One hopes that this consensus is yet another sign of the several churches' intention to undertake the ministry of Jesus Christ *together.*

It used to be often said that bodies of Christians could be grouped into those who say "worship" and those who say "liturgy," the former supposed to be the more Protestant word, the latter the more Catholic. One pleasant by-product of the renewal and consensus of our time is that such artificial distinctions no longer apply, if ever they did.

Background

Christian worship has two sources, a "general" human source and a Jewish source.

1. In referring to a general source I mean that it is apparently natural for people to ritualize their activities. In particular, rituals are associated with three types of occasions: times of change or crisis, changes of season, and times of remembrance.

Thus when Christians ritualize times of change or crisis they are doing what can be observed in societies generally past and present. Initiation, marriage, funerals, even the restoring of a penitent, these rites of passage are simply what people everywhere commonly do: transformations like these *need* ritualization in the human community.

So seasonal changes have been important for Christians as they are for all peoples. Our two central festivals, Easter and Christmas, occur at times of important seasonal change. The winter solstice lies behind the date of Christmas and the spring equinox is so closely

tied to Easter that the moon determines the annual date of our central festival.

Times of remembrance are typically times of re-enactment, times in which community shaping events are re-entered. The Exodus from Egypt was such a community-shaping event and the annual celebration of Passover re-enacts that event. The annual celebration of Good Friday-Easter allows us to re-enter the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is this kind of anniversary-keeping that gave rise to the Christian calendar, and similar times of remembrance in other societies have shaped their calendars. The early Christians not only marked the events in the life of Jesus but also other anniversaries. We are told, for example, that at the burial places of early martyrs, the faithful gathered annually "in joy and gladness to celebrate the day of . . . martyrdom as a birthday," the date of the martyr's birth into eternity.[1] It is such examples that give rise to the calendar of saints as well as to places of pilgrimage.

For most readers of *Touchstone,* the most powerful example of the ritualization of times of remembrance in Christian worship is the Eucharist. In the prayer most typically called "The Great Thanksgiving," we re-enter the action of Jesus, "who on the night he was betrayed took . . . blessed . . . broke and gave" bread and wine as his body and blood. At every celebration of the Lord's Supper, we prepare the table by placing thereon the elements for blessing (the act of taking). Then we offer thanks (the act of blessing). Then we make provision for distribution (the act of breaking) and then we distribute (the act of giving). We re-enter the action of Jesus at his last meal with his friends before his death. And we do it "in remembrance . . ."

By re-enacting the meal and by keeping anniversaries, by re-entering the life and examples of Jesus and the saints and martyrs, Christians have evolved not only a calendar but also an identity. The importance of this point cannot be overstated. Time-keeping (calendars, remembrance) is a way of maintaining memory, and our memory is an essential ingredient in our identity. In other words, if we do not retell our history (tradition, origins, "story"), we will lose our self-understanding, as if not only orphans but amnesiacs. In this light, one might take the directive of Jesus to "do this in remembrance" of him in two ways: do this so as not to forget who *he* is/was and do this so as not to forget who *we* are.

Lastly, on this matter, the remembrance of which we speak, the remembrance of which religious rituals are made, is of a peculiar and particular sort. It is the kind of remembrance which has *the power to make present what is remembered.* It is thus to be distinguished from remembering a telephone number or the like. Rather, it is the sort of remembering that leads people to feel and smell and hear the elements of what is remembered, to re-engage

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[1] See "The Martyrdom of Polycarp" in *Early Christian Fathers,* edited by Cyril C. Richardson (New York: Macmillan, 1975), p. 156.

it even if for the first time, as might be true with new initiates. This kind of remembering is able to "re-present" the past with power in the present.

In addition to these particular times of ritualization (change, season and remembrance), there also appear to be common means (things, etc.) used in these rituals, particularly religious rituals. It is the basic stuff of life that is fundamental to human ritualization. Hence, the use of such things as water and food, and the doing of such activities as bathing and eating are to be expected. This being so, our rite of water baptism and our sacred meal, however specific they may be in their relation to Jesus, are a part of the expression of our humanity and our relatedness to humankind.

Though further amplication could be offered and might well be needed, neither time nor space allow. The point to be made is this: Christian worship is the ritual life of the Church and has roots, deep and sometimes surprising roots, in the humanity God has created.

2. If the general background for Christian worship is the life of humanity, the specific background is the worship life of our Jewish forebears.

> Christianity's deepest debt to Judaism (as regards the sacraments) is the mentality that conceived of the use of certain actions and physical objects as means that God and humans can use to communicate with each other. And yet God remains transcendent, never to be confused with the created. In this way, even inanimate objects can gain power to speak and yet never become identified with God themselves.[2]

Since the first Christians were Jews, the adoption of this mentality into Christianity is hardly surprising. In addition, we receive from the Jews much of our ordering of time, for example, the seven day week, the Great Fifty Days (in Christian terms the time from Easter to Pentecost: for Jews, the time from Passover to the Feast of Weeks). Our ritual cleansing (Baptism) is a Christian derivative from Judaism, mediated to us through John the Baptist.

Likewise the importance of meals (sacred or otherwise) is an obvious inheritance from both the Jewish home and the worship of the Temple. The table fellowship which Jesus enjoyed with his friends is the social context for our Eucharist, and the prayers of thanksgiving at such meals are the patterns for our eucharistic praying.

Further, the pattern of the synagogue appears to be at the heart of what finally developed both as the Christian form for daily common prayer (the daily office or the liturgy of the hours) and the liturgy of the Word which precedes Holy Communion. This simple synagogue pattern was comprised of readings, exposition on the readings, prayers.

Add to this the number of words that survive in Christian (Greek) usage, — Amen, Hallelujah, Hosanna, Abba — and one gets some

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[2] *Introduction to Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), p. 147l.

idea of the extent to which Christian worship depends on that of the Jews. This is our continuity.

Definition and Commentary

Definitions of complex matters often mean little until some commentary is provided. Thus the following definition, which is best understood as a definition in process, is but the springboard for the subsequent commentary. The definition:

> The Church's liturgy (Christian worship) is the corporate act of offering response to God, empowered by the Holy Spirit in participation with Jesus Christ, both priest and victim, in his body, the Church; an activity descriptive of the whole assembly of Christian people, acted out together with and through representatives.

The Commentary:

Corporate

The definition rightly pre-supposes that our public worship is not the private devotions of particular or isolated individuals. At the same time, it is often true that we forget what it means to speak of worship as something corporate. It means, for example, that we ought to use corporate language in our prayers and hymns. Once the liturgy begins, we have constituted ourselves as a manifestation of the Body of Christ and as such have laid aside our particularity for the moment. We are now the Body. Therefore, *we* pray, *we* confess *our* sins, *we* praise and thank. It is an irony of our age that we imagine participation in a group to carry with it a necessary loss of identity. It was not too long ago that just the reverse was the case. Without real participation in tribe or village or family as a prior condition, we were lost. Our worship life necessitates our recovering that same sense, the sense of being "we" *before* being "I."

The body imagery which the word "corporate" sets out carries with it notions of inter-relatedness, inter-dependence and orderliness which are integral to virtually any collective activity. More than most such activities, however, the liturgy is a time and place for self-conscious mutuality. That some people persist in wanting to go to church on Sunday morning at 10 or 11 o'clock, along with other people, in order to be alone with God is one of the contradictions we Christians can well do without!

Act

Christian worship is something done; it is an activity. As Ninian Smart put it, "to worship is to perform a piece of ritual."[3] This be-

[3] *The Concept of Worship* (London: Macmillan, 1972), p. 5.

ing the case, the frequent passivity of Christians at worship raises some uncomfortable questions.

Offering response to God

The central point to made here is that God's activity *precedes* ours. What we do is response; it is second in time and logic. It is this fact which testifies most clearly to God's pre-eminence in our worship. Not only does God receive what we offer, God also elicits it. God's act in creation, in the Exodus and at Sinai, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, these are the acts which call out of us the response we offer.

Consequently, what we do on Sunday morning ceases to be authentic worship when we forget that the liturgy is an offering given to God; it is no longer authentic worship when we see the subtle shifting of the liturgical focus moving from God to ourselves. "We can see this beginning to happen," writes William Perry in a necessarily lengthy passage,

> when (as is often the case) we try to assess an act of worship in terms of how effectively it has taught a particular doctrine, or how well chosen the hymns have been for the purpose of ramming home the message of the sermon. This is a particularly insidious perversion and there can be few of us [presumably clergy] who have not been guilty of it at some time or other. It is a perversion because it treats worship, not as an activity whose justification is to be sought solely in itself and by its own inherent criteria, but as something which has to justify itself by the criteria of quite another discipline. In this case, it is the discipline of education which is given priority. An act of worship is felt to have "succeeded" if a message or a doctrine has been so clearly articulated in the course of it that the worshippers are firmer in their grasp of that aspect of Christian truth after the service than before. The prayers may still technically be addressed to God, but they are selected according to their probable effect on the congregation; the same applies to the other parts of the service. When this happens, it is not worship we are planning but instruction. As Colin Dunlop warned us a generation ago, the person who does this 'has failed to justify public worship; he has merely succeeded in employing the time formerly occupied by public worship in doing something else.'[4]

If the nature of our offering must be as Perry (and Dunlop) describe, the content of our offering is the content of our praying, i.e., praise and adoration, thanksgiving, confession, petition and intercession. In addition, we offer up the whole of creation, symbolized by bread and wine, money, ourselves. Hence, our responsive offering is finally embodied by our lives.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit

If we succeed in our offering, it is because of the empowerment by the Holy Spirit. For Christians to worship the God-who-created-

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[4] Michael Perry, *The Paradox of Worship* (London: SPCK, 1977), p. 5.

all-that-is, we must say "Jesus is Lord." And as Paul has made clear, we do that only by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3).

To speak thus of the empowerment of the worshipping community by God's Spirit may suggest at first glance that since it is God who is both the initiator and recipient of our worship, we are not really actors in this at all. William Perry calls this tension "the paradox of grace." He writes,

> The paradox of grace assures us that worship is hard work, requiring human effort and will. It assures [that] it is necessary work, actually achieving something within the divine economy. Yet it [also] reassures us that we would have no will to worship if it were not given us by God, and no effectiveness to our worship had not God designed it so.[5]

This reassuring vision testifies both to God's inclination to initiate activity in us and God's willingness to receive creation back from creatures. Both are authentic expressions of God's loving attitude toward us.

In participation with Jesus Christ, both priest and victim

It is our common language to speak of ourselves as "in Christ" (II Cor. 5:17). To be baptized is to be a new creation. And our being this new creation enables us, through the graciousness of God's act of incorporation, to participate in the very life of Jesus Christ.

The exploration of this aspect of our definition presses upon us three comments. Firstly, the Letter to the Hebrews provides us with the priestly imagery of the definition. The ascended Lord, the mediator of Hebrews, stands as our High Priest, offering the eternal sacrifice of himself. It is only in participation with this ascended Lord that we, the Church, are a priestly people.

At the same time, the priestly imagery must be balanced and informed by another powerful Christological figure. This second image is that of the servant/victim. The One who is ascended is the One who was crucified. The Christ of the liturgy, in whom we participate, is both priest and victim. At the table, he is, as it were, host (the hospitable one) and Host (the one on whom we feed).

The second comment is this: the Christ in whom we participate must be seen in the liturgy in both these dimensions. Too often, the Christ of the liturgy is inadequately symbolized. One leans too far either to the risen priestly (or sometimes kingly) side or the humiliated, servant side. The richness of our Christological centre requires balance.

(One way this balance can be afforded is by the use of the Christian calendar. The pattern of days and seasons is such that the balance we are urging sees to itself.)

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[5] *Ibid.*, p. 18.

A third and final comment on this aspect. In our remarks about the general sources of Christian worship, much was made of the relatedness of Christian ritual practice and that of other religious folk. To that emphasis must be added this point: what is unique about Christian worship is Jesus Christ. All that we say and do is offered "through Jesus Christ." This is the mark of Christian prayer. It is through Christ that Christians approach the throne of the God-who-created. This uniqueness frees us, then, to see our relatedness to others without fear that somehow what is peculiarly Christian is thereby diluted. This happy insight is one of only recent vintage. Its truth makes possible in greater measure our sense of bonding with worshippers of whatever sort or kind.

An activity descriptive of the whole assembly of Christian people, acted out together with and through representatives

To speak of worship as *descriptive* is to suggest that worship is one of these acts which constitutes the essence of the Christian life. This logic leads further to the conclusion that one cannot claim to practice the Christian life and, at the same time, not be a part of the worshipping community.

It is true that worship and its ritualization are "natural" to Christians as they are "natural" to humankind. This point was made earlier. It is also true that to be a Christian is to be a part of Christ's body, that aggregate known historically as the Church. The most common and characteristic manifestation of the Church, Christ's body in the world, occurs in its gathering for the common praise and adoration of God. To be separated from that activity would seem to remove necessary evidence of one's commitment to the Christian life.

Secondly, Christian worship is a common activity, common to the whole assembly. Unfortunately, the truth of this statement is seriously tested in some congregations. That is, taking the physical evidence at face value, it would often *appear* that the real worshippers (actors) were the clergy and that others in the building were more properly called an audience.

To put the matter differently, through time the liturgical life of the Church has experienced a severe and inappropriate clericalization. Some will think of a clericalized liturgy as a problem peculiar to the churches of a catholic persuasion but such is not the case. Evidence of clericalized corporate worship is available in many corners.

It is necessary for the worship life of the Church to be ordered so that it can be done by a group. Groups require order. Further, the ordering of our common life has required that some people take-on special responsibilities for the sake of the community. This distribution of responsibilities, though not inherently hierarchical, has all-too-often led to the translation of *role* (function) into *rank* (status).

In point of fact, the liturgy is the Church's. It is done by all the people assembled. There are only participants. There is no audience! Those persons appointed by the Church to places of special responsibility are representatives, not substitutes, functioning "on behalf of" and *not* "in place of" anyone! The liturgy *is* "the work of the people."

Because it is the common activity of the Church, Christian worship needs *to be and be seen to be shared.* This might mean that the various liturgical ministries could be more widely distributed than is often the case. It could also mean that the congregation's worship committee might not only participate in the planning of the congregation's worship but also assist in training those who share the liturgical ministries.

This leads to a final point. To speak of the whole assembly as participants means that the assembly as mind and body is at worship. Too much evidence suggests that the bodies of the Body are neglected. So much of what we do is cerebral and not corporal. Indeed, it almost appears that there is physical deprivation in some churches! Color, movement, liturgical art — these give occasion for people-as-bodies to involve all of the humanity God has redeemed in the praise and adoration of that same God.

IV Two Supplementary Categories

Worship and preaching

Early-on in these remarks, we spoke about the subdivision of Christians into those who say "worship" and those who say "liturgy." Another such sub-division is the one between those who are alleged to value the liturgy over preaching and vice versa. The substance for this caricature is to be found in the fact that for many years, preaching was not a normal part of the celebration of the Mass in the Roman Catholic Church and the celebration of the Lord's Supper was not a normal part of the preaching services which characterised many Protestant churches. Happily, like so many other things in this age of liturgical consensus, the caricature proves itself to be just that.

Increasingly, it is the common acknowledgement of the churches that the Word that is preached is the same Word that is enacted at the table. It is further declared that the ideal toward which to strive is the permanent bonding of word and sacrament, such that the Church would not do liturgical preaching without the Liturgy of the Table and the Church would not celebrate the Liturgy of the Table without the full Liturgy of the Word.

Further, it should be pointed out that the remembrance and recapitulation of which ritual activity takes part are intimately related to the telling of stories. And surely the Story which is told and retold in the Church's preaching is fundamental to our identity-in-remembering. This is especially true if the preaching is aided by the patterning and rhythms of the liturgical year and its lectionary.

Worship and Social Justice

Setting worship and social justice in opposition or contrast, as is so often done, is a sad and false dichotomy. But having said that one must be quick to point out that there are examples to be cited which would support the dichotomy, however false in theological terms.

The relationship between the Church's worship and its calling to acts of justice is rooted in Christ, the Christ whom we have called priest and victim. If one sees a body of Christians who neglect acts of justice as inappropriate in favour of liturgical privatism, we must ask, who is the Christ of the Church's liturgy? And if one were to see a body of Christians who spurned praise and common prayers in favour of "good deed," we must ask, who is the Christ of the Church's mission? Surely, it is the same Christ who requires us to visit, feed, clothe, heal and serve the world who *also* requires that we preach, baptize and "do this in remembrance . . ."

Two further points need to be made, both related to our liturgical life. Firstly, when we assemble for worship and thus show forth the Body of Christ, we engage in an act of community which stands over-against all that is fragmentary, demeaning and isolating. Our act of solidarity is a sign of the Kingdom which judges all that is debilitating to life. As such, our assembling is *in itself* an act of social justice. Consequently, for example, the language of dismissal, language which often directs us to go into the world, to love and serve God, to be a blessing to stranger and outcast, this language needs to be spoken and heard as prophetic.

Secondly and finally, there is yet another way in which the liturgy itself is (or must be) a place of justice. The liturgy must evidence *within itself* justice for which we strive and pray. This would mean, for example, that the liturgy must not discriminate against the illiterate, that the place of worship must not discriminate against the handicapped, that our liturgical language must be radically inclusive and that liturgical responsibility must be properly distributed among women and men. Our liturgical gatherings then need to represent to us the intention of our prayers.

V Final Comments

Most of what would pass for conclusions have been presented in the body of this essay. Re-iteration seems a needless extension, and the things that remain to be said should likely remain to be said, for the present.

It might be appropriate, however, to offer a few bibliographical suggestions, through which further exploration could take place. For those who preside in the worshipping community, *Strong, Living and Wise* by Robert Hovda is a basic book. Sadly, the publisher, the Liturgical Conference, has just recently allowed this book to go out of print. It should be available to *Touchstone* readers from the libraries of the assorted theological colleges. Good books on worship in general are Marianne Micks, *The Future Present* (Seabury),

James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship* (Abingdon), William Willimon, *Word, Water, Bread and Wine* and *Worship as Pastoral Care* (both Abingdon). Valuable reference books would be *The Study of Liturgy* by Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright and Edward Yarnold, S.J. (Macmillan) and *The Westminster Dictionary of Worship,* edited by J. G. Davies (Westminster).

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